

# A Discussion of David W. Blight's *Yale and Slavery: A History*.

**Yale and Slavery: A History.** By David W. Blight with the Yale and Slavery Research Project. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024. 448p. \$35.00 cloth, \$24.00 paper.

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Since Craig Steven Wilder's 2013 book, *Ebony and Ivy*, a scholarly field has grown as universities continue to launch investigations into slavery and racism in their pasts. Dozens of schools have produced reports. Academic presses have published a host of scholarly works examining universities as well books as on abolitionist colleges, collegiate pro-slavery thought, institutional slaveholding, and more. Universities turning their scholarly tools of inquiry toward critical self-examination has become a burgeoning field. David Blight and the Yale & Slavery Research Project offer the latest profound contribution to this conversation with *Yale and Slavery: A History*. The book situates the school's founding in colonial Connecticut and traces the story of slavery and its afterlives at the university into the twentieth century.

*Yale and Slavery* confirms Wilder's argument in *Ebony and Ivy* that the "academy...stood beside church and state as the third pillar of a civilization built upon bondage" (p. 11). This new history painstakingly details both Yale founders' and early Yale leaders' participation in and commitment to bondage, while also highlighting those who evinced antislavery sentiments or challenged popular beliefs. Ever attendant to change over time, it charts how Yale University grew "in prestige and power as it relied on the unrecognized labor of Black people" in creating and maintaining the New Haven school (p. 1). The history of slavery and Yale thus rightly remains embedded in the histories of New Haven, Connecticut, New England, and the United States. Those stories include enslavement, calls for Black removal, antislavery thought, abolitionist activity, and the political activity of Black community members. In charting that history, *Yale and Slavery* makes some signal contributions that should refine the direction of similar research projects in the future.

First, *Yale and Slavery* situates the birth of the school in an era of endemic conflict between settlers and Native Americans and demonstrates how ideas regarding community, citizenship, inclusion, race, and education were shaped profoundly by that history well beyond the colonial era. It argues that African slavery cannot be understood in Connecticut or at Yale without considering the colonial context of both African slavery and endemic warfare with Native Americans. Evolving colonial legal thought increasingly considered both Native Americans and Africans as threats to the social order, especially if they were free (p. 25). Only enslavement or removal would therefore ameliorate the threat. At Yale's founding, one in ten property inventories in Connecticut included enslaved Africans (p. 26). Unsurprisingly, New Haven elites, in "their quest for piety and power," founded Yale University while holding considerable wealth in human beings (p. 37). The book's object lesson—in which the authors connect evolving ideas about race, hierarchy, and community to Native American removal and deculturation as well as to African slavery and anti-Black racism—is one future university history research projects, including at Yale, will now be challenged to contend with.

Second, as with other university histories, *Yale and Slavery* highlights the contributions of Africans and African Americans to the institution and the broader community. That work is important. It also juxtaposes the predominantly white university's institutional history with the experiences of the enslaved. It does so, however, in a way that includes Black New Havenites' words, ideas, and activities as trenchant counterpoints to those promulgated by so many scholars and leaders at Yale. Beyond detailing the experiences of those enslaved at Yale, in New Haven, or by members of the Yale community, David Blight and his team insistently contrast stories about Yale leaders with the words and actions of Black locals.

For instance, the story of Yale's rise as an eminent university in the early American republic is followed by the 1831 attempt to create a college for Black Americans in New Haven. That effort met with fierce white resistance,

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which argued that quality education for whites would be threatened by the creation of Black schools. Similarly, the authors move immediately from Jonathan Edwards Jr. and other enslaving elites at Yale—who opined on racial difference, the dangers of emancipation, and schemes for deporting freed Blacks—to enslaved New Haven man Jupiter Hammon’s words. In 1786, Hammon wrote “An Essay on Slavery,” a poem delivering a powerful “moral condemnation of slavery” (p. 100). Later, Yale Professor Benjamin Silliman’s life and scholarship and Yale graduate John C. Calhoun’s pro-slavery politics are juxtaposed with that of Robert M. Park, a free Black man whose work in the laboratory and classroom with Silliman guaranteed that he was far more than a Yale janitor. Park in fact “participated in and contributed to the professor’s scientific work,” a reality Silliman readily acknowledged in his lifetime (p. 121). Yet despite Park’s scientific expertise, his active community leadership (he co-founded a Black New Haven church), and his political commitment to antislavery, Park was remembered by the white Yale community as merely a “faithful” servant (p. 123).

Third, and most importantly for the field, *Yale and Slavery* frames its work around the concept of memory, understanding the university as a “collective intergenerational memory community” (p. 9). That framing highlights the possibility for new memories based in more rigorous historical understandings, but it also raises limitations, as memory communities often represent profound roadblocks to change. Yale students and alumni across the generations together form living communities with broadly shared worldviews and frozen-in-amber memories of what makes their alma mater glorious. Yale University and its living memory community in the decades after emancipation repeatedly and uncritically lionized famous

‘Yalies’ including pro-slavery ideologue John Calhoun (p. 303) and Yale’s slaveholding founder Timothy Woodbridge (p. 310), caricatured Black Yale employees including Robert M. Park, and diminished the successes of a handful of Black graduates. Those choices were in some ways unsurprising, as they were partly the result of racialized ideas about political inclusion first developed long ago and honed over the next two centuries. Yale’s memory community, in that political context, was shaping and reshaping a particular brand of belonging that privileged white Yale identity. Thus, the book ends on a doubtful note, hinting that all the contemporary work on slavery might fail to become a part of Yale’s future collective memory communities.

The powerful thread running through this history is white supremacy. It shaped ideas about community in 1700, citizenship in the Revolutionary and Civil War eras, and white identity in the age of segregation. It also demonstrates how Lost Cause mythologizing would become popular even at Yale, embodied in the school’s Civil War Memorial. *Yale and Slavery* ends with Yale’s rapturous reception of D.W. Griffith’s 1915 white supremacist epic, *The Birth of a Nation*, a half century after emancipation and three constitutional amendments creating and protecting Black citizenship. Blight concludes by gesturing to how much more work at and on Yale remains to be done—fifty more years of eugenics, racist ideas, their impact on public policy, the continued glorification of slaveholding alumni—all before the beginnings of desegregation, co-education, and the like. He is correct. Despite the fine work here, Yale and other universities have only just begun to confront the past. Simply put, there is much more self-reflective research to do.